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PLATFORM FOR INTERNATIONAL ART
FROM AFRICAN PERSPECTIVES



Michael Soi. Courtesy of the artist

SPECIAL EDITION #NAIROBI





C& Critical Writing Workshop, Nairobi participants. Photo courtesy of C& and Francis Munene



Contemporary art from African perspectives is extremely rich. Needless to say, this intense and broad art production requires critical voices – from Lagos to Nairobi to Lubumbashi to Harare to Luanda – to contextualize and document it.

In March 2014 we held our first C& CRITICAL WRITING WORKSHOP in Lagos. The feedback from thirty or so young journalists and our four tutors – senior journalists from Nigeria, South Africa, and the UK – was extremely appreciative. This was reason enough for us to plan a whole series of workshops in various cities on the African continent with the generous support of the FORD FOUNDATION.

The objective is to build sustainable networks and offer participants a platform to create opportunities for exchange across different areas of cultural practice. This is about broadening the basis for discussion with and contributions to C& as well as to other outlets: let there be as much creative critical writing as possible.

The first stop of the Ford Foundation funded workshops was Nairobi, from 3 to 8 December 2016.

From a huge number of applications we selected an interesting, talented, and committed group of young art writers mainly based in Nairobi, as well as from Kampala, Addis Ababa, Kigali, and Arusha. Their energy, seriousness, and engagement lead to great discussions, new friendships, and insights, leaving tutors Zihan Kassam, Thom Ogonga (both from Nairobi), Hannah Pool (London), and Sean O'Tool (Cape Town), as well as ourselves, deeply inspired as much as impressed.

To mark this remarkable encounter we felt it was appropriate to produce a special print issue with contributions by all the workshop participants. This issue was written, designed, printed, and distributed in Nairobi with Rose Jepkorir and Francis Ronjey bringing it all together on the ground.

We have produced 10,000 issues that are being circulated “guerrilla style” all over Nairobi. The idea: let's go beyond the usual art hubs and institutions, let's make it possible for any person walking on the street to get their hands on an issue. They might realize that it's actually their neighbor, cousin, or a friend of a friend who is this amazing young writer. Who says that what these writers have to say only interests experts from the art scene? Exactly. So enjoy this very special issue.

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DENNIS MURAGURI: THE ARTIST WHO ALMOST BECAME A BUS-TICKET TOUT

DENNIS MURAGURI is creating a body of paintings, prints, installations, and sculptures inspired by matatus, the buses and mini-buses that are Kenya's public transport. **LUKORITO JONES** talks to him about this project and his journey as an artist so far.



Dennis Muraguri, *Matatu Dots*, 2015. Courtesy of the artist

A description of Kenyan culture would be incomplete without the inclusion of the buses and mini-buses that account for the country's public transport system. Colloquially known as *matatus*, these vehicles are a hallmark of Kenya's pop culture. Though a tad chaotic, *matatus* provide a cheap and convenient way for many Kenyans to get around. Dennis Muraguri, one of Kenya's foremost contemporary artists, is creating a body of work inspired by *matatus* through painting, printmaking, installation and sculpture. Stepping inside Muraguri's studio at Kuona Trust in Hurlingham, Nairobi, you would be forgiven for thinking you've just entered a *matatu* museum. The *matatu* woodcut prints on paper and woodcut plates are the most striking, if just because of their sheer size. One depicts a scene in which financial institutions, city authorities, and the police are extorting *matatu* operators. It is aptly titled *Chakula ya Ngururwe*, which is Swahili for "food for the swine." While growing up near a bus park, Muraguri never dreamt of becoming a lawyer, pilot,

neurosurgeon, or engineer, as was the norm with most of his peers. He was swept up by the idea of becoming a *matatu* tout or driver. "*Matatus* were very fascinating to me as a child," says the artist. "The agility that touts possessed while jumping in and out of *matatus*, the crazy driving skills, hanging onto the doors of speeding vehicles... All those acrobatics always left me awed." Muraguri further remembers that back then *matatus* shaped every aspect of peoples' social interactions, from the language they used to the music that they listened to. Sheng, the unofficial lingua franca in Nairobi and most of the rest of the country, traces its roots to *matatu* crews. "The first time you'd hear a word of Sheng was in a *matatu*," Muraguri says. "The first time you'd hear a new song or watch a new music video was in a *matatu*. The current generation owes a lot to the *matatus* of yore, just as today's *matatus* are shaping the future. It is my duty to preserve contemporary *matatu* culture through art and pass it down to future generations." At one time, Muraguri seriously contemplated

dropping out of school to become a tout. His mother, however, would have none of it. She sent him to the Buruburu Institute of Fine Arts instead, where he graduated top of his class four years later. Muraguri credits the Nairobi-based Circle Art Gallery for supporting him as he exhibited at the 1:54 Contemporary African Art Fair in London. "Even though art lovers from Europe and America are unfamiliar with *matatus*, they still bought my work for its abstract appeal," he recalls. "Everybody in Kenya has their own *matatu* story," the artist points out. "People ride in a *matatu* not just for its primary purpose of transportation. It means immersing oneself in a moving theater. For the observant, a trip in a *matatu* is even more intriguing than a Hollywood blockbuster. Even though visitors to Nairobi sometimes view the *matatu* culture as unruly and undisciplined, Kenyans have fully embraced it, and all of this provides me with great fodder for my artwork."



A matatu in Nairobi with graffiti by Mohammed Karrrtar. Courtesy of Lukorito Jones



Dennis Muraguri, *Tin Tin*, 2015. Courtesy of Dennis Muraguri



THE ART SPACE

Opened in 2015, The Art Space has evolved from a commercial art gallery based in Kenya, into an online space with regular pop-ups in popular and sometimes unusual spaces around Nairobi. We feature art for sale from new and established artists in our Vault and for hard to find works, in our Collector's Den.

Through art exhibitions and informal conversations, The Art Space allows for growth and critique in the visual arts.

The Art Space focuses on contemporary art from Africa and links artists with the contemporary art market, locally and internationally.

We offer art advisory services for new collectors and assist current collectors to curate and catalogue their existing collections.



THE ART SPACE

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SHAPING THE BIGGER PICTURE

Wary of an art scene that seems to be always looking outside of itself (and mostly to the Global West) for recognition, and deeply cynical of government involvement in art programs, **JIMMY OGONGA**, curator of the Kenyan Pavilion for the Venice Biennale 2017, meets **AWUOR ONYANGO** for an interview. Named after one of James Baldwin's books, *Another Country*, the pavilion is going ahead in spite of the government's reluctance to release funds for it in time.



A work by Paul Onditi at the Kenyan Pavilion at the 57th Venice Biennale. Courtesy of Paul Onditi

AWUOR ONYANGO: Could you please give us a brief history of how you came to curate the Kenyan Pavilion?

JIMMY OGONGA: In short, the cabinet secretary of the Ministry for Sports, Culture and the Arts nominates the commissioner and the curator. The curatorship for the 2013 and 2015 pavilion was awarded to Armando Tanzini, who included twelve artists, most of them Chinese. In 2015 there was an outcry, mostly by artists in Nairobi who felt it was not representative.

AO: Did you already have a plan to curate the pavilion in 2013 and 2015?

JO: Yes, we actually had a proposal for Venice in 2013 and submitted it to the government, but it didn't reach the right people – or Tanzini had better connections. In 2013 local artists were willing to take part in this platform. This should have been the determining factor, instead of choosing someone who may not have the right intentions.

AO: In your opinion, what does displaying Kenyan artwork at Venice have to do with cultural and artistic production within the country?

JO: It is important for good contemporary art to be shown in Venice, a high-level international platform that validates and provides a much-needed push for artists' careers. Having a national pavilion has

obvious repercussions in terms of art history, access to international markets and audiences. It is a statement of seriousness from both the artists and art institutions, as well as from the government.

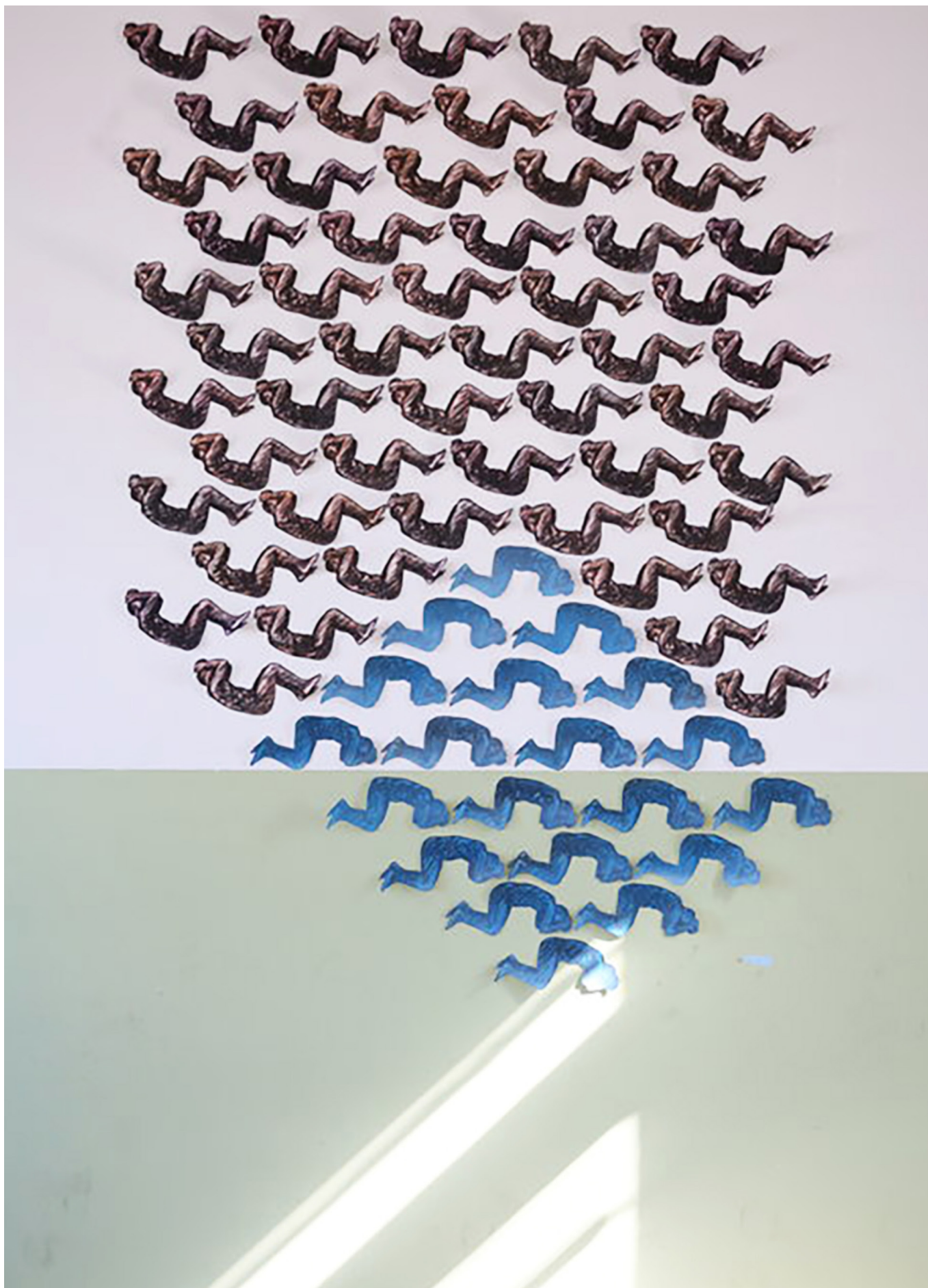
AO: Does participation in the Venice Biennale have any influence or repercussions in Kenya?

JO: What happens when a country manages to take part in the World Cup or the Olympics? Just like the World Cup, Venice is a huge international event. Look at what happened to the Zimbabwean artists and the national Zimbabwean art scene after participating in the four editions of the Zimbabwean Pavilion. My feeling is that once you are present there, more people will be interested in the local art scene, artists might be invited to more international events. We are talking about exhibition catalogues as knowledge conservatories; it's like being plugged into the international contemporary art scene. That is why the repercussions are obvious to me. However, the individual artist's career will depend on him or her – let us not think that this pavilion will work miracles for all Kenyan artists.

The exhibition *Magiciens de la terre* was very distant from me when it happened in 1989 [at Centre Georges Pompidou and the Grande Halle at the Parc de la Villette in Paris], yet still, although it was not designed to benefit me directly, it started a very important conversation for me as Jimmy Ogonga. Repercussions can be complex – we can try to anticipate them, or have the conversation retrospectively.



KENYAN PAVILION IN VENICE



A work by Peterson Kamwathi at the Kenyan Pavilion at the 57th Venice Biennale. Courtesy of Peterson Kamwathi



AO: Why James Baldwin, a queer Black icon whose work is steeped in his queer Blackness?

JO: I think we need to separate the artist from his work. I would rather talk about the work than the artist.

AO: The work in this case being *Another Country*. How does it play into the pavilion?

JO: The book is clear – it is a tragic narrative about eight characters who live in difficult and unforgiving times. I use Baldwin's narrative and the artists' work to see what other narratives come up. Baldwin stood for something. He was able to formulate something both a scholar and the man on the street would understand – an interesting mix of a scholarly and non-scholarly disposition to look at society. In Kenya, contemporary art does not have the necessary educational infrastructure to be able to decode or unpack a lot of the things that we are talking about or are dealing with as a society.

Baldwin also had the ability to speak to power in a critical, emotionally balanced way. He spoke critically to the Black people, to the white people, to the liberal, the queer community. He spoke critically to all these people without pushing them away.

This book, *Another Country*, and the work by the artists in the Kenyan Pavilion give us a rich reading of the society we are experiencing at this point in time. If you add in Christine Macel's revolutionary theme for the art show, Viva Arte Viva, we have the opportunity to see the power of art.

AO: How does this reflect the state of a country which identifies more as African than Black and, quite frankly, doesn't recognize queers as part of its population?

JO: When we are talking about Baldwin's queerness, it is important to understand that I don't describe him as queer, and when setting up the pavilion we did not focus on sexualities in providing certain opportunities. It is not really my objective in the exhibition to comment on the issue of queers in Kenya.

AO: On that note, Simon Njami, who in turn identifies as Black but not as African, is listed as an advisor to the project advisory role. How did this come to be?

JO: Simon Njami is Simon Njami. *Revue Noir*, one of Simon's earlier projects, included an anthology of African and Indian Ocean photography. A number of writers and photographers came to research in Kenya and East Africa, creating context about photography in Kenya in the early 1990s. It was the first time that I saw anyone writing about photography in Kenya from that perspective. He was invited by CCEA (Nairobi) as artistic director of *Amnesia*, running for about six years with workshops, exhibitions, publications covering a population of artists from Nairobi and from different parts of the world.

AO: Does the list of participating artists comment on art or artistic practice by female artists in Kenya?

JO: I cannot use the artists/artwork in the pavilion to tackle this issue. It is a question that is not part of this process, a question for somebody else to look into.

AO: How have you dealt with or negotiated the cynicism in the process of producing the pavilion?

JO: By working, preparing, and doing everything that needs to be done. We have managed to get commitment from friends in Venice, and although the Kenyan government has not provided us with any money we are going to have the Kenyan Pavilion.



A work by Arlene Wandera at the Kenyan Pavilion at the 57th Venice Biennale. Courtesy of Arlene Wandera

AN AUDIOVISUAL MOVEMENT WITH A CULT FOLLOWING: ADDIS ABABA'S GOONGOON

GoonGoon, the driving sound behind Ethiopiawi Electronic, provides a space for amateur and professional artists in a city that lacks many creative outlets, write **SARAH ABDU BUSHRA** and **MEHERET-SELASSIE MOKONNEN**.

One of the oldest parts of Addis Ababa, Ethiopia's capital, is Kazanchis, and Kazanchis is home to DinQ Art Gallery, a thriving venue for emerging and established contemporary Ethiopian artists and women artisans. DinQ hosts a regular "Sip and Paint" evening, where mostly amateur painters drink wine and paint on canvas using acrylic provided by the gallery. DinQ's Sip and Paint events provide a glimpse into Ethiopia's flourishing contemporary art scene. At one Sip and Paint, a participant created a painting later used as a poster image for the Ethiopian New Year edition of GoonGoon, a local underground electronic music event. The artist was one of four roommates living at Maushaus, dubbed as such due to its onetime rat infestation. This edition of GoonGoon was called *TinishCazy* ("a bit crazy"). Followers of GoonGoon, which is a movement rather than just an event, are usually informed about events via WhatsApp or SMS from one of its founders, Rami and Aron Simeneh. GoonGoon started August 12, 2016 with the success of its predecessor, *Gold & Wax Presents*, a team of two musicians managed by Aron who sample Azmari songs in an alternative scene. Their messages are composed in a familial, witty style, often referring to the followers as "People of Zamounda." Much like the music, which only appeals to a certain few in Addis, the posters that accompany each edition of GoonGoon appear daring in the city's "safe" visual culture. An alternative to the Addis clubbing scene, GoonGoon's driving element is the kind of

music the event revolves around, which is Ethiopiawi Electronic, loosely translated as "Ethiopian electronic." GoonGoon had been organizing events for local fans of Electronic Dance Music (EDM). As Aron preferred the term Ethiopiawi Electronic, Addis Ababa's EDM lovers adopted it and are now also making a clear distinction between EDM and Ethiopiawi Electronic. "We are not an EDM movement – we actually hate the term, as it has nothing to do with our kind of music," Aron told C&. "I would go with Ethiopiawi Electronic as a whole and for a deeper explanation." With Ethiopiawi Electronic gaining critical acclaim locally and internationally, GoonGoon is swiftly becoming the "it" event. It has cultivated a flock of loyal followers that move from place to place as it moves to different locations around town. The scene also invites Ecstasy consumption, visibly increasing the camaraderie among Ethiopiawi Electronic goers, who have established relationships that extend beyond shared nights out. The DJs mix thousand-year-old Ethiopian lyre and flute tunes with electro sounds. Two prominent producers and DJs are Endeguen Mulu and Mikael Seifu. Endeguen Mulu is a leading light of Ethiopia's burgeoning electronic music scene. Sometimes using nothing more than a PC, Ableton software, and a mouse, he makes his own eclectic brew of unique sonic textures, using electronic music tools and Ethiopian traditional music as the inspiration and foundation of his music. Mikael Seifu is a music producer and

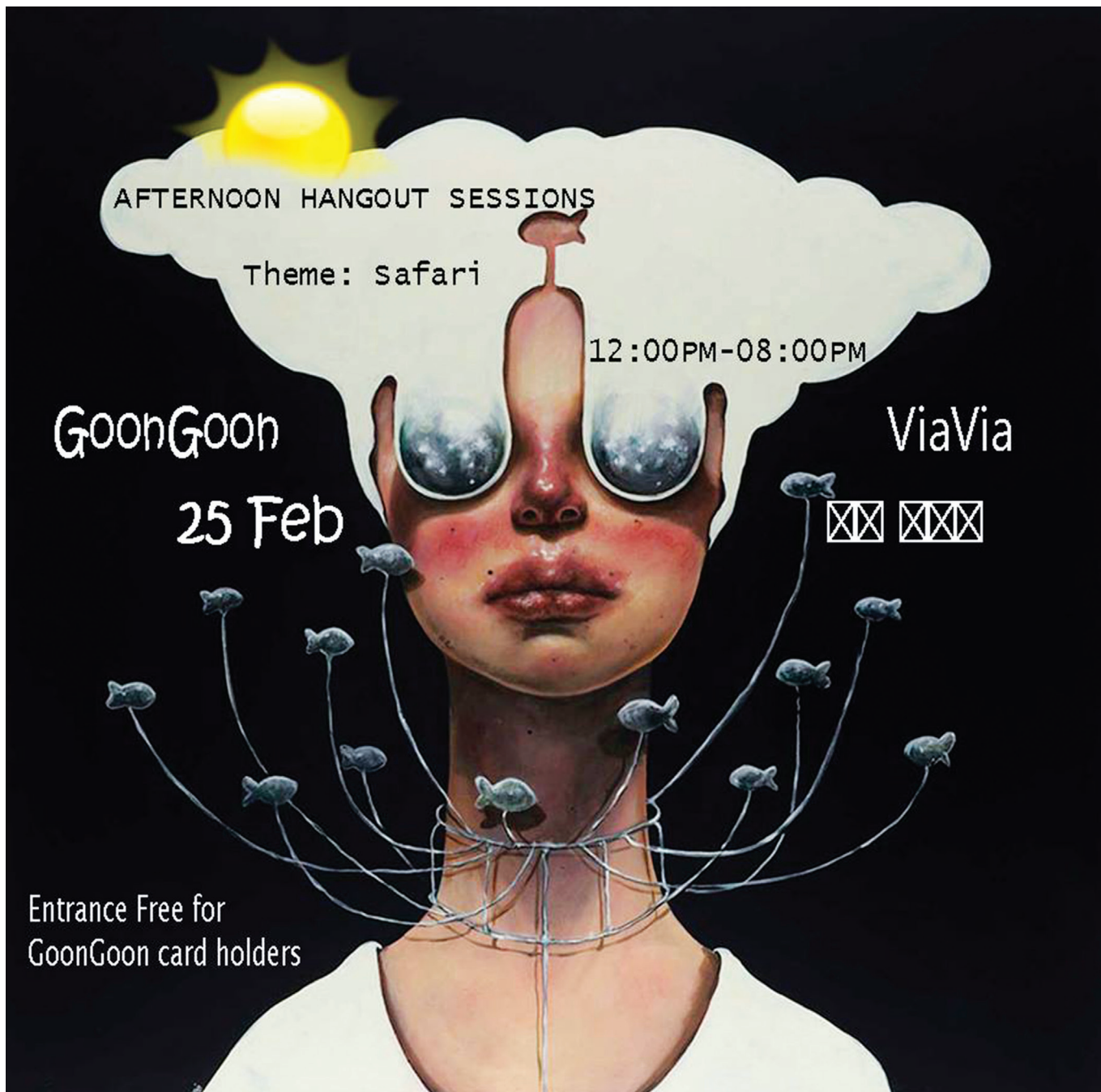
performer. He fuses secular Ethiopian traditional folk music (known as Azmari music) with his own sound. His debut EP, *Yarada Lij*, draws from a long list of musical influences, including Ethiopian and African folk, the Addis Acoustic Project, Ben Neill, Burial, Zion Rebels, Air, Röyksopp, and reggae.

GoonGoon's visual culture has also grabbed attention. Highlighting their musicians, GoonGoon uses branding elements such as logo and poster design. The aesthetics of the underground movement and its graphic representation hold a significant place in Addis Ababa's visual culture. Aron, whose lifelong passion has been fashion, describes the visual aspect of GoonGoon as a creative outlet, saying, "I took the initiative to take care of graphics and learn in the process, mainly because that was the only creative outlet I had two years ago when I moved back to Ethiopia."

It is difficult to find regular arts and culture activities in Addis. In addition to foreign cultural institutions, such as the Alliance Ethio-Française and the Goethe-Institut, private initiatives like DinQ and GoonGoon strive to fill the gap. Interconnecting the arts – music with visual art, photography with fashion, and so on – the young art community laments the lack of venues and struggles to find outlets. In this regard, GoonGoon provides a creative space for original work including popular artworks. Financial capacity is a significant factor in creating logos and posters. "We make sure to come up with teams who brand the venue



GOONGOON



A painting by Afarin Sajedi was featured in the latest GoonGoon poster

with the budget that we have,” Aron tells C&. According to Aron, he and Endeguen focus on Ethiopian contributions, and if and when crew members have their own ideas, he makes sure they’re within GoonGoon’s spectrum. He says this mainly consists of “keeping it urban, young and the key word is ‘weird’ – our own definition of weird, that is.”

The logo, font, color palette and poster designs reflect an Ethiopia context. At Eventsoja, an arts and culture events website, a “GoonGoon Gold & Wax Edition

Underground” event was promoted with an ad which artistically embodied the Ethiopian flag by using colored letters: the date of the event written in green, the venue in yellow, the organizers’ label in red, and the address in blue, representing the star on the flag. At Addis Box Office, a website for music, clubs, theater, sport, movie reviews, and trailers, an ad for a GoonGoon event recently read “At Morning!!! Work hard & get ready to take off this Saturday at Absinthe Lounge for GOONGOON! We will go big, hard and

unapologetic with the best performers in AA’s Electronic scene! Great week to you all !! xGG.”

The latest GoonGoon poster, announcing its return to the birthplace of its predecessor, Gold & Wax Presents, featured a painting by Afarin Sajedi, an Iranian artist known for her portraits of women, often in bizarre combination with fish.

GoonGoon and Gold & Wax Presents’ Facebook page is the main online venue for its visuals. Each event is promoted with unique





GOONGOON

graphic design. For example, Sajedi's painting was intertwined with the place and theme of the event promoted. The color and size of the lettering on the designs also correspond with each event. Their popular Facebook page exhibits graphic designs combined with paintings, photography, and fine art photography. One event was advertised in chalkboard paint, the

words carefully crafted to match the message. Traditional Ethiopian art is a primary means through which GoonGoon promotes events. For example, a photo of a *netela* (a traditional Ethiopian scarf) was displayed on Facebook to announce a prominent venue for the event, the ViaVia Restaurant. A fading black-and-white poster promoted an Ethiopian Records night featuring Mikael

Seifu, Odet, and Key Kebero. Nights with reggae tunes are highlighted in green, yellow, and red with a photo of dreadlocks. Needless to say, GoonGoon has provided the urban youth with a space for musical and visual arts. Though Ethiopiawi Electronic started long before GoonGoon, it's the driving sound behind the movement.



One event had a chalk-board style ad





CRITIQUE AND VALIDATION: ON BEING YOUNG ARTS JOURNALISTS IN KENYA

Writer **WANJIKU MUNGAI** asks **BRYONY BODIMEADE, CARLOS MUREITHI,**
and **DAISY OKOTI**, all in their twenties, about how they got into the field, the importance of
maintain autonomy from both publications and subjects, and questioning handed-down truths.



FROM LEFT to RIGHT: Bryony Bodimeade, Carlos Mureithi, Daisy Okoti, Wanjiku Mungai. Photo: Dhvani Tombush



WANJIKU: What do you do on a weekly basis?

DAISY: I write for *The Daily Nation*, *Potentash*, and about film for *Arts Matters*. *The Daily Nation* is a bit structured, but I decide whom to interview so I still get to do my thing.

BRYONY: I've been doing an online course in copy-editing and putting on exhibitions in our flat. I've always written for myself but am never regimented enough, so when I have the opportunity I love to do it.

CARLOS: I work from Tuesday to Saturday at *The Daily Nation*. I started writing in 2012 and became primarily a sub-editor in 2014.

W: How do the two compare?

C: I enjoy writing more because I love telling stories. But I understand *The Daily Nation* style and have a good command of English, so I notice when something is amiss.

B: Do you feel sub-editing helps your writing?

C: Definitely. You see the kind of mistakes people make, and avoid them when writing.

W: How much autonomy do you feel you have?

D: I used to feel limited, but I discovered a way around it: different publications for different things. If I want to write about an exhibition, I find an arts editor at a specialized publication.

C: There are two ways I look at it. First: what are you writing? If it's a news piece there's less flexibility, but for a feature story you get more length and can play around with words. I've also learnt you have to look at the editor.

B: I find it quite easy to have a boundary when writing for a particular publication or institution. In writing for the *Circle Art Auction*, I was doing research on over 50 artists, communicating their significance within Kenyan art history. You're selling their work, so you won't go in with a critical perspective – in some ways I found that frustrating. For example, I wanted to change this habit of selling an artist by suggesting they're "self taught."

W: That's a thing?

B: I think it's left over from the Gallery Watatu artists, who were encouraged to paint in what was considered a "naïve" style, the story being that they were "uncontaminated." It's really patronizing and diminishes their experience.

I'm also cautious about writing something I might regret afterwards, especially as I haven't lived here very long. As soon as you're writing about something, it's like you're suggesting you're an authority.

W: Have you ever written about an artist who wasn't happy with what you wrote?

B: I presume so, because I was critical about the ideas in one person's work. Quite a few times I've gone back to check if I was justified. I'm getting used to my words being edited, but somebody can do a headline and a caption [that does not reflect] how I wanted something to be said.

C: I try not to have a relationship with my subjects. I'm reviewing the work, not the person who's made it. If someone close to me asks me to write about their work, I would rather ask another journalist.

D: I worry about future generations. If I write something, it's going to be there for 500 years. I think my academic training [in literature and sociology] makes it easy to be objective, but not always.

W: What about getting critiqued? Carlos, you wrote an unfavorable review of Binyavanga Wainaina's memoir One Day I will Write About This Place...

C: Yes, I was criticized by him. I was in university at the time, and he said it was a shallow review and that *The Daily Nation* was using students to write.

D: I was invited to a screening [of Simon Mukali's 2014 film *Vere*]. I hate lazy stories about Africa, like about the stereotypical politician. The headline my editor chose for my piece read "Stereotypical Film Premieres in Nairobi," so of course I got some calls.

I try to ensure I can be accountable: I never watch a film only once; I get background information, even if it doesn't make it into the story. I've also been lucky to have experienced editors to catch my errors.

W: So you're saying it's really helpful to have people with the knowledge to hold you accountable?

D: Yes. I'm not at that level where I can write something and then pass it. I've been writing for seven years and still feel that it's very important to have someone to check your work.

W: Have you had to write about someone you really admire?

D: Chimamanda Adichie. I didn't think she could do anything wrong, [particularly] when I was younger.

B: In the arts there are things accepted as truths, about what the art is about, or the claims an artist makes about their work. Like: "this is the most important artist of his generation and his work is about the human condition." Can I verify that? I try to go back to describing what's in the art. But if it is somebody you think is the best ever, you're more likely to continue with those accolades.

C: At the time I wrote that Wainaina review, I loved his work. Halfway through the book I didn't feel the same way. That's one of the reasons I decided to write the review: he had a cult following, so I couldn't believe he was writing things that didn't add up.

W: Is there an engaged audience for your writing?

D: The problem with mass media is that you get little feedback – millions read but few comment. But sometimes you get comments that are three times as long as the article. Once with *Art Matters* I got a message from my literature department chair saying he'd been following my work. At *The Daily Nation*, you get official mail or meet someone who knows your byline. Someone insulted me once when I wrote for *Potentash* about why tribalism is not important.

C: There's an audience, both the general audience and insiders within the arts industry. The people within the industry don't just give comments, they say, "Can you write about this?" For the general audience, you write something and then people re-tweet.

B: I love it so much when I write something and people are like, "You should read this," or "Why did you write that?" If you care enough about the subject you'd rather be corrected and told when you're going in the right direction. And at the same time, just like money in the arts is always a debate, writers are doing the same thing, not validating with money but with words.



APRIL: ENABLING WOMEN TO REALIZE THEIR ARTISTIC POTENTIAL IN DAR-ES-SALAAM

The three members of APRIL are currently embarking on part two of their curatorial project. **ASTERIA MALINZI** discusses the genesis and the trajectory of APRIL so far.

APRIL is a three-part curatorial project exhibiting work by female artists and curators in the East African region. April, derived from the Latin word *aperio*, means “to open.” According to the Romans, it is the time of year when the earth opens itself to the growth of vegetation. Conceived in late 2015 in Dar-Es-Salaam by myself in collaboration with two of my childhood friends, fellow photographer Maysoon Matthyssen and designer Asia Sultan, APRIL creates a space for women to explore their artistic potential and be celebrated in the art industry.

Having all grown up in Tanzania before moving to Cape Town, South Africa for our studies, we had the privilege to attend art schools, regularly visit various exhibitions, work at art fairs and festivals, participate in artists’ talks, and intern in art galleries. We experienced the joys of living in a city with

a thriving art scene, but it became clear to us that gender gaps in the Tanzanian art scene afforded few opportunities for women to be successful.

In response, in January 2016, Sultan, Matthyssen and I co-curated *APRIL A Female Art Group Exhibition* as part one of the APRIL curatorial project in Dar-Es-Salaam. An eclectic crowd attended the exhibition, which included ten established and emerging Tanzanian artists, both in the country and in the Diaspora. It also featured two emerging artists, from South Africa and Germany respectively. The youngest artist to present her work was six-year-old Pearl, who showcased three figurative paintings. A selection of thirty works of photography, fashion, painting, graphic design, culinary, writing, film, and music were presented.

Later this year, APRIL embarks on part two of its curatorial project, *The Kitchen Party*. The

exhibition will be curated by former Circle Art Gallery intern Roseline Odhiambo, and is to be held in Dar-Es-Salaam. Kitchen parties are a pre-marital female tradition in many sub-equatorial African countries, whereby the bride-to-be is given a wealth of information about marriage and womanhood. Exploring this setting, the exhibition aims to create a dialogue around the kitchen as a traditionally gendered space, but also a fugitive space of survival, growth, unity, and reflection.

We have put out an open call to female artists in the East African region working in art. If you are interested in being part of APRIL’s upcoming exhibition, email us at april@theaprils.info. If you would like to learn more about us, visit our website: www.theaprils.info.



Left
Attendees view photobooks on display at *APRIL A Female Art Group Exhibition* in January 2016, Dar-Es-Salaam
Right
Installation view at *APRIL A Female Art Group Exhibition* in January 2016, Dar-Es-Salaam





APRIL COLLECTIVE



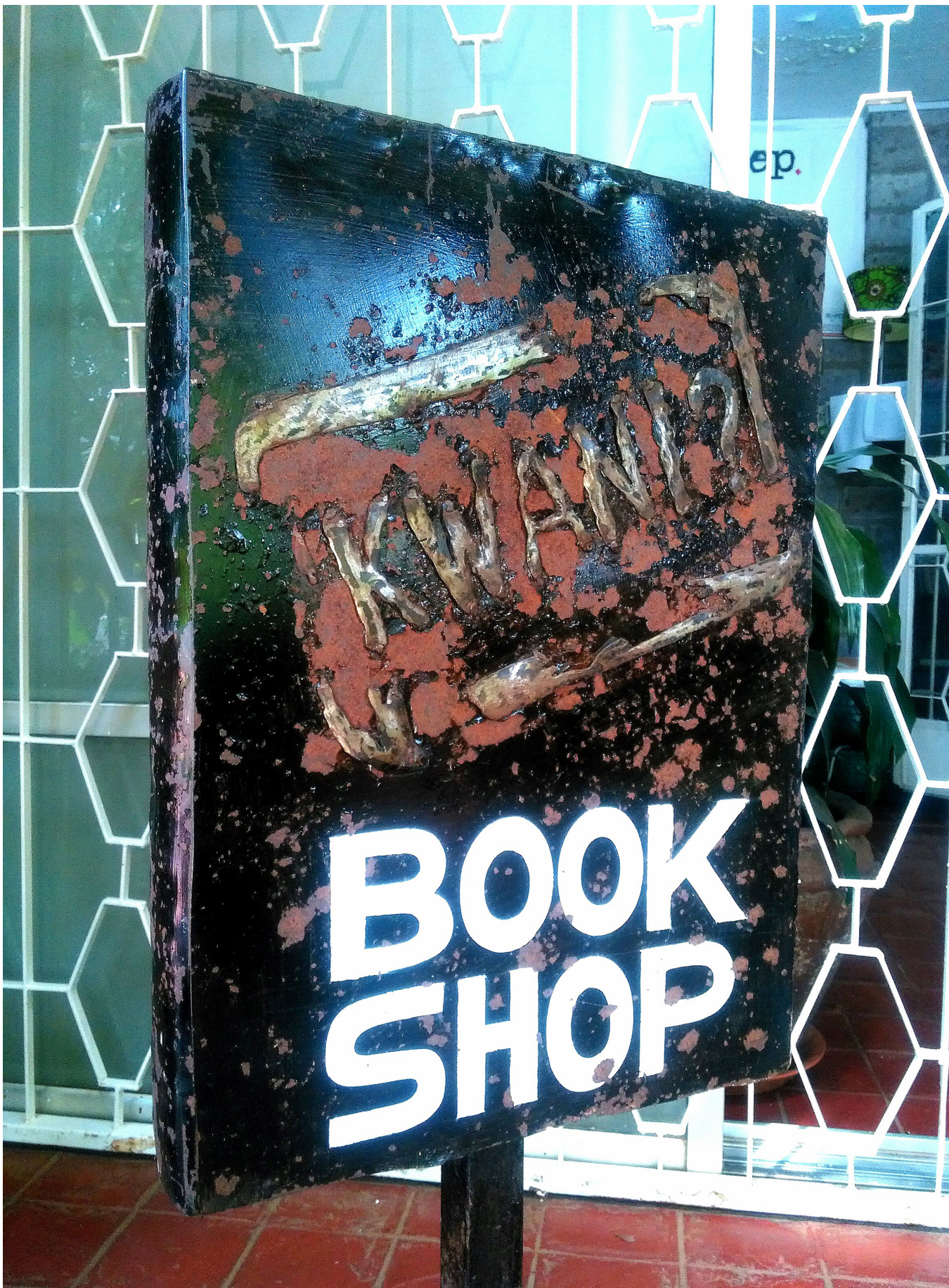
Above

APRIL artists at *APRIL A Female Art Group Exhibition* in January 2016, Dar-Es-Salaam

Below

Attendees view photobooks on display at *APRIL A Female Art Group Exhibition* in January 2016, Dar-Es-Salaam





The *Kwani?* office in Nairobi.
Photos on page 18, 19 and 20 courtesy Don Handa

KWANI?: EXPANDING SPACE FOR LITERARY PRODUCTION

The **KWANI TRUST**, publisher of the literary journal *Kwani?*, engages in a range of activities geared towards expanding the space for – and the scope of – literary expression in Kenya and the greater East Africa region. **DON HANDA** talks to **ANGELA WACHUKA**, director of the trust, about the editorial vision that drives *Kwani?*



The Kwani Trust developed fourteen years ago out of a need to open up a space for narratives emerging from the socio-political context of contemporary Kenya. Its director, Angela Wachuka, cites a generation of writers keen on creating a home for literary expression that has accommodated newly developing approaches to form and language, and acknowledging non-mainstream practices as legitimate literary endeavors. Wachuka gives the example of the Sheng' and Swahili rap pioneered by Ukoo Flani Mau Mau, recognized widely for their lyrical and linguistic inventiveness – and who released an album to accompany *Kwani?* 3. The organization's commitment to collaboration

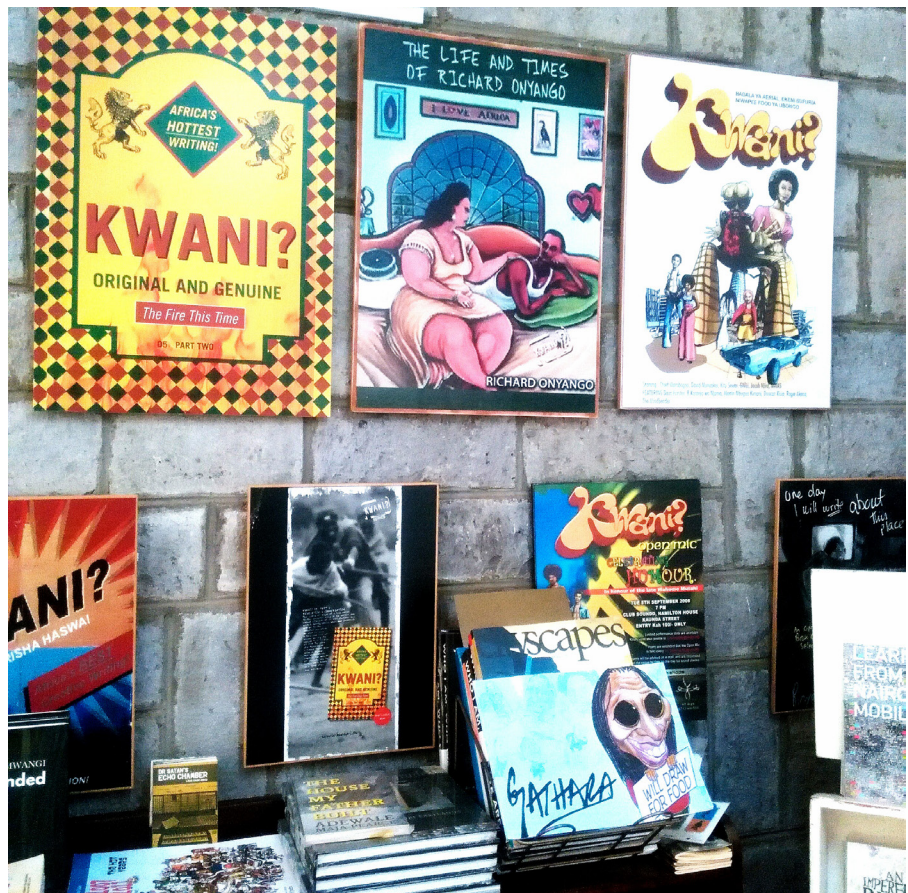
across different art forms has also resulted in renowned Kenyan artist Michael Soi producing an accompaniment to *Kwani?* 6, and a long list of other collaborators, including Wangechi Mutu, Gaddo, Jim Chuchu, and Mbithi Masya. Seeking to dislodge a reductive, constrained awareness of Literature with a capital L, Kwani's approach has been to include other forms of expression, music and images, in their publications. "The idea from the beginning was always that the covers themselves are conversations," says Wachuka. This approach has seen *Kwani?*, the trust's flagship publication, using visuals that activate a kind of nostalgia for certain brands, events,

and historical moments in order to counter and subvert a commodification of literary production in the country. Digital space offers opportunities for distributing and consuming creative literary products, and Kwani is keen on exploring these opportunities, but not blindly so. Wachuka speaks of having identified upwards of 600 *Kwani?* pieces that would translate well online, and her current attempt to conceptualize a trans-media storytelling experience. "One of the biggest opportunities we have, at the moment, is imagining what a multimedia experience of *Kwani?* would be like," she says. For Kwani, an online space should not merely be an outpost on the World



Wide Web, but a self-contained aesthetically driven experience. A further consideration is the creation of an archive that embraces the discourses that have come up about and around *Kwani?* content as well as the material itself.

If *Kwani?* was conceived out of an interest in the creation of alternative space(s), then how does it guard against becoming the kind of establishment organization it set out to counter? For Wachuka, this is avoided by making concerted efforts to expand the existing space so that other individuals and groups can come in and make their own unique contributions. This is what leads *Kwani?* to expand its reach into areas of resource mobilization, network building, and even policy research and formulation. An example of this is its ongoing work to present a sector-led proposal that counters the pro-censorship policy proposed by the Kenya Film Classification Board in 2016. The task at hand is to build an ecology of cultural producers that spans various disciplines, making room for diverse contributions to a dynamic cultural narrative.





ON RWANDA'S INCREASINGLY DIVERSE VISUAL ARTS SCENE

Regenerating originally through the use of traditional crafts, since 2000 Rwanda's visual arts scene has seen a proliferation of art forms, galleries, artists, and viewers, writes **ANDREW I KAZIBWE**.

Though Rwanda's arts are centuries old, originating through architecture, body ornaments, crafts and unique painting practices, they waned following the 1994 genocide that wiped out many lives. In recent years, however, a new awakening has seen many embrace a growing arts culture. First to emerge was the crafts business, and a variety of crafts shops in hotels and commercial areas appeared to sell products that range from *agaseke* (the Rwandan traditional basket) and mats to wearable art forms like necklaces, bracelets, handbags, and earrings.

Visual art practices have grown from *imigongo*, paintings crafted from a mixture of cow dung, clay, brown soil, and aloe plant sap, which dates back to the 18th century, to a diverse painting culture that incorporates realism, semi-abstract and abstract art. The visual art scene has increased in vibrancy since 2000, as various art galleries have emerged in the capital, Kigali, which have in turn ushered in and groomed more talents.

First came Inganzo Art Gallery, which was initiated by 74-year-old Epa Binamungu in 2002; then Ivuuka Art Centre in 2007, founded by Collin Sekajugo, a young Rwandan. This encouraged more young people to find inspiration in culture. In

2012 the Inema Art Centre was founded by brothers Emmanuel Nkuranga and Innocent Nkurunziza, becoming another thriving spot for young local painters. Other art galleries and studios include Uburanga Arts, Imagine Art Gallery, Niyo Art Centre, Yego Art center, Agasozi Art Centre, Concept Art Studio, and Motherland Arts, which have given rise to unique concepts and art forms in Rwandan society.

Today, artists and galleries typically hold regular art exhibitions and invite the public to witness and appreciate their work. In a bid to familiarize the public with the emerging art sector, most galleries have organized unique sessions alongside their exhibitions. Inema Art Centre holds the Art Jam, which features live painting and DJ music sessions; Uburanga Arts introduced Igitaramo (Rwandan Cultural Evening), which features traditional dances and live instruments. Such public activities are being adopted by other galleries too.

Many artists work with semi-abstract and abstract painting, while others produce mixed-media artworks and installations, so a variety of artworks can now be found in galleries and public places. Artists can now earn quite steadily from their practices, with prices for paintings ranging from as low as RFW 40,000 (USD 50) to over RFW 2,400,000 (USD

3,000), depending on size and other factors. Though originally dominated by men, the sector has led to the rise of female visual artists whose work is also recognized. Crista Uwase is known for creating collage works with recycled paper. Poupote Tabaro creates unique abstract designs on canvas, using acrylic and oil paint. Hortance Kamikazi's nature-inspired works merge plant remains with artificial recycled materials like wire mesh and metal, forming her own distinctive mixed-media style. Uhirwa Diane and Pearl Karungi are semi-abstract painters who produce acrylic works, while Jemima Kakizi makes both wearable fashion and acrylic paintings. Today, the art scene is steadily gaining recognition, with public places like hotels, restaurants, shopping malls and some offices embracing locally made artworks. A love for arts is evident in the paintings and weaved décor that adorn the walls of these venues. The Rwandan government has also established the National Art Gallery, which is located in Nyanza district, 85 km from Kigali. The facility has a collection of Rwandan art, from the ancient to the contemporary, in various forms including painting, sculpture, mixed-media, and installation.





RWANDA'S ART SCENE



An acrylic-on-canvas painting by Jamal Ntagara. Photo: Andrew I Kazibwe





RWANDA'S ART SCENE



A painting-on-canvas work by Fabien Akimana. Photo: Andrew I Kazibwe



Rwandan artists share a moment with an admirer at Kigali Impact Hub. Photo: Andrew I Kazibwe



MAKING SENSE OF POLITICAL NARRATIVES

ENOS NYAMOR on how some Kenyan artists reflect on political events in Kenya, Africa, and the globe, and establish to their creations and creative processes.



An oil-on-canvas painting from Joseph Bertiers' *US Elections Campaigns 2016* series. Courtesy of Joseph Bertiers

Kenya remains politically hyperactive. A decade ago, political antagonism nearly drove the nation to the brink of disorder. And some visual artists, using a mix of media and concepts, continue to interpret such social narratives through political art. Kevin Oduor has been active in the art scene for more than twenty years. He has dedicated his career to public sculptures, and his statue of freedom fighter Dedan Kimathi, at the tip of Kimathi Street in Nairobi, is one of the most

recognizable pieces of political sculptures in the capital. Yet Oduor's art allows him little room for independence. His public projects have been in the form of government tenders and contracts. And because it is imperative that he represents his subjects as heroes, he must be mindful of disappointing the authorities and register disapproval, if any exists, in a concealed and clever way. So his protest is often subtle and only traceable in curves, wrinkles, and postures. "My art does

not merely lie in the shaping of the physical form, which is like the repetitive task of toy making," says Kevin Oduor. "It exists in the simple distortions that I make on a figure based on research and techniques. It is only close family members to the heroes who quickly recognize these alterations." Other artists openly register protests against the democratic upsurge in Africa and even question the relevance of democracy today. Those who protest are often introspective



ENOS NYAMOR



Patrick Mukabi, Siasa Mbaya, metal, 98 x 250 cm. Courtesy of the One Off Gallery





in their approach. Unlike most young artists, who tend to eschew political art, Longinos Nagila, 30, has been fascinated with politics. Some of his previous creations, specially in the 2014 expressionist series “Mwanzo Mpya,” were critical of the unity between politicians and the clergy. In April 2016, after eight months of research, experimentation, and production, Nagila held a successful exhibition, *Democracy My Piss*, at the Kuona Trust gallery in Nairobi. The show’s title was almost enough in itself, since it described Nagila’s disapproval of ignorant electorates across Africa. Through an installation and a video, he dismissed the idea of democracy altogether. Rather than domesticate, Nagila questioned the African approach to democracy, especially after observing the chaotic Ugandan elections in early 2016 while he was in transit to Rwanda. Since breaking away from colonial powers, Kenya has undergone spurts of political clashes. The most devastating event was the 2007 crisis in which some 1,333 lives perished. Of all the political happenings, artists have maintained most silence on the post-election violence, but Patrick Mukabi mounted a delayed public art response. In *Siasa Mbaya, Maisha Mbaya* (Dirty Politics, Miserable Life), a collection of two-dimensional pieces, Mukabi reflects on the events. It took him

about five years to conceptualize a series, in which he shaped naturalistic figures from repurposed rusty roofing sheets that were salvaged from houses scorched during the crisis. The metal cut-outs are depictions of men and women in aggressive behaviors. Some of the remaining pieces are stocked at the One Off Contemporary Art Gallery in Nairobi, where they imposingly stand as public art. It took that long for Mukabi to dedicate his art to civic education because he was waiting for the right time, and because he was wary of the public’s reception of the theme. Reconciliation and justice are sensitive issues in Kenya, and the public tends to avoid close examination of the historical conflicts. “*Siasa Mbaya, Maisha Mbaya* focused on the people,” he tells C&, “because they, and not the politicians, were on the streets rioting, killing, and looting. And they went to the streets involuntarily.” If Kevin Oduor uses his art to comment in a small way, then Joseph Bertiers does the opposite. Bertiers is a storyteller. A quick glance at his work would be careless. Only after hours of examining every object, place and event in his paintings can one follow the narrative. Without his intervention, sometimes, it can take days to make sense of his work. “I always add value to my political paintings by making them complicated. When

I do so, some people are impressed, and that means everything,” Bertiers says. Each year, and depending on the political climate, Bertiers commits his energy to creating satirical pieces. His realistic oil-on-canvas paintings are exclusively political and often depict world leaders in incredible, informal contexts, and even shameful situations. While Bertiers avoids taking sides in Kenyan politics, he directly expresses criticism of the West in his works. He believes that, in pursuit of foreign policies, western powers fan conflicts in Africa. Unlike his peers, who approach political narratives through abstractions, Bertiers is unwavering, and his work targets specific world leaders, from President Donald Trump and his predecessor to President Robert Mugabe. Political art in Kenya tends to traverse the edges of imagination. Depending on individual artists’ preferences, at one time they comment on foreign policies, at another they examine the sustainability of the democratic system or simply commemorate. Dissatisfaction with the status quo dominates the narratives of leftist artists, such as Longinos Nagila, who is aware that he cannot avoid political commentary. But he hopes for political and social changes so that he can reinvent himself.





KELI-SAFIA MAKSUD

KELI-SAFIA MAKSUD ON MAKING ART THAT REFLECTS HYBRID AFRICAN IDENTITIES

KELI-SAFIA MAKSUD, a 32-year-old Kenyan artist whose interdisciplinary work aims to break the linearity of nationalist histories to include feminine voices, talks to **MARTHA KAZUNGU** about identity, studying abroad, the women's march, bleach, and more.



Keli-Safia Maksud, *Usafi ni Ustaarabu*, performance, 2014.
Photo courtesy of the artist





Keli-Safia Maksud, *Beasts of No Nation*, 2014, mixed media collage on mylar, 18 x 24 inches.
Courtesy of the artist

Martha Kazungu: Why are you interested in working with the idea of identity?

KELI-SAFIA MAKSUD: The question of identity began when I left Kenya for the first time to go to study in Toronto. In many ways I lost a certain amount of agency in terms of how I was read and represented. In North America, I was either under the banner of "Black" or "African," but both of these terms are quite fixed in that they negate a plurality and fluidity in our experiences and histories. This led me to explore the construction of identity. I am interested in exploring the multiple voices of my hybrid background – Kenyan, Tanzanian, Canadian, Muslim, Christian – which are often contradictory, in order to destabilize fixed notions about "African" identities. I'm always looking for ways to make it possible to realize the multiple relations, rather than fixed nodes, that inform our contemporary identities.

MK: There is a stereotype that African artists who study abroad are usually brainwashed and come back home changed. What has your experience been like?

KSM: This idea is not confined to only artists but rather anyone who leaves to study abroad. I wouldn't say brainwashed because it requires force and reduces the subject to victimhood. Being in a new space has an impact on a person as they get exposed to new ideas, languages, societal concerns. Although today we have access to the world via the internet, so one can get exposed to new ideas without leaving one's country. In my experience, there hasn't been any negativity coming back home, but I take time to understand new environments and the contexts before positioning myself within them.

MK: In *Usafini Ustaarabu* (Cleanliness is a Sign of Civilization), the idea of cleaning is considered as both an act of purification and of violence. How is cleaning a form of violence?

KSM: A few years ago I started utilizing bleach as a medium in my practice. When bleach and soap were first introduced into the market in the early 19th century, they were advertised in Britain and within the British Empire as a social purification agent. Typical advertising then consisted of images of Black and white children, monkeys, white clothing, and mirrors, and the message was that soap offered some kind of magical metaphoric transformation. These images of cleanliness, appearance and beauty were used to define social hierarchy and difference and the British Empire could legitimize its colonial position at home through the stance of social purification. *Usafini Ustaarabu* stemmed from these ideas and the everyday violence that is imbedded in geography, but also the violence of erasure and the interplay between public and domestic spaces.

MK: You have engaged the female body in some of your work. What is your take on how gender and sexuality have been leading global dialogue?

KSM: That's a big question! The Women's March around the world was absolutely necessary in light of the political climate that we find ourselves in. However, there are points of fracture depending on where you're looking at it from. For example, in Nairobi the march took place in Karura Forest, where one had to pay an entry fee to access it. So the question of class and access is relevant. In general, I am wary about talking about gender on a global scale because there is still much that needs to be addressed locally and also in other countries around the world.



Left

Keli-Safia Maksud, *Mitumba*, Vlisco fabrics, bleach and water, 2015. Courtesy of Everton Ballardín.

Right

Keli-Safia Maksud, *Mitumba*, 2015. Courtesy of Everton Ballardín

'ARTISTS NEED TO TAKE A LEADERSHIP ROLE': MICHAEL SOI ON KENYA'S ART SCENE

Figurative painter and **MICHAEL SOI**, 45, tells **ROSELINE ODHIAMBO** about his twenty years practicing as an artist in Nairobi and what should change in the scene – such as the current dependence on foreign funding and a saturation of “experts.”



Michael Soi

ROSELINE ODHIAMBO: There are many schools of thought that define the role of the artist in society, from Nina Simone's idea that an artist's duty is to reflect the times, to Chinua Achebe's meditations that the artist's role is that of optimism – not blind or stupid optimism, one that is meaningful and views the world as imperfect and with the potential of being improved.

What do you think is your role as an artist? Why do you create and why have you been doing this all these years?

MICHAEL SOI: The role of an artist is often very specific to the individual artist. At the moment, I document the city of Nairobi and its activities. More critically, I look at things that people might not necessarily want detailed and recorded.

RO: A huge feature in your work is the female form – women with big afros and braided hair, voluptuous curves, often sparingly clad. How does the female form function in your work?

MS: I create work that highlights women's issues in Africa, particularly issues that relate to how men view and treat women. My work focuses on the roles assigned to women as implements of joy, pleasure, and a means to an end to be enjoyed by men. Often people would rather not talk about this and prefer to bury their heads in the sand and pretend that these things do not happen. The aim is to influence how men view and relate to women.

RO: You have created a clear pictorial language that sets your work apart, and people can clearly identify your hand. How did you find your style, and do you have any plans to venture into other media or forms?

MS: The life of an artist is full of experiments. I can't definitively call it my style for now because I might not be doing it tomorrow. My practice is a never-ending experiment



A painting by Michael Soi. Courtesy of Michael Soi

RO: You've been practicing as an artist in Kenya for about 20 years, and were previously an art administrator here. In what ways has the Kenyan art scene changed, and in which direction do you think it is headed?

MS: Unfortunately nothing has really changed. It's only the players that change. To be honest with you, I think artists need to take a leadership role in their affairs if we are to head anywhere. Everyone is an "expert" in the Kenyan art scene. We have too many "experts" who went to school to study biology, business, mathematics, law, or even astronomy operating in Kenya as artists or curators. That is where our problem is. We need professionals to run this industry. Furthermore, our overdependence on foreign funding is crippling. The only beneficiaries seem to be the cultural managers. Artists need to take back their art scene.

RO: From your exhibition at Kuona Trust in Nairobi earlier this year,

you donated 50 percent of all proceeds from sales to the organization struggling to get back on its feet. What was your impetus for doing that, and what do you think is the way forward for Kuona Trust in the long term?

MS: I love Kuona! My career started there in 1995. I know the role it has played in bringing about a whole new generation of Kenyan creatives. Even so I think that they should shut it down. Kuona has played its part.

RO: You've exhibited your work and participated in residencies all over the globe. Is there any one of these experiences that stands out as a major turning point or learning experience in your career?

MS: Residencies all have merits and demerits. In my experience, they have been exciting learning opportunities, especially through intercultural dialogues. What an individual artist does with the

knowledge gained from residencies is up to them. I still reference and create from some of these experiences now.

RO: More generally, what influence does a new space have on your creative process?

MS: If I am very critical, I have literally only worked in two spaces: the GoDown Arts Centre and Kuona Trust. The time spent in a residency is too short to really say I have worked there.

RO: After the circus that was the Kenyan Pavilion at the Venice Biennale in 2013 and 2015, Kenya officially has a pavilion at the Venice Biennale 2017 curated by Jimmy Ogonga featuring some of Kenya's finest contemporary artists. What are your thoughts on this?

MS: I honestly feel like I played my role. In 2013 and 2015, we exposed the proposed Kenyan Pavilion as fraudulent both at the curatorial and government level. Now, under the curatorial direction of Jimmy Ogonga, I believe it is his turn to step up to the plate. We would all love to see a proper Kenyan Pavilion in Venice this year.

RO: Last year you launched the Nairobi Bag Factory, a store selling your hand-painted bags. What are your aspirations for this project?

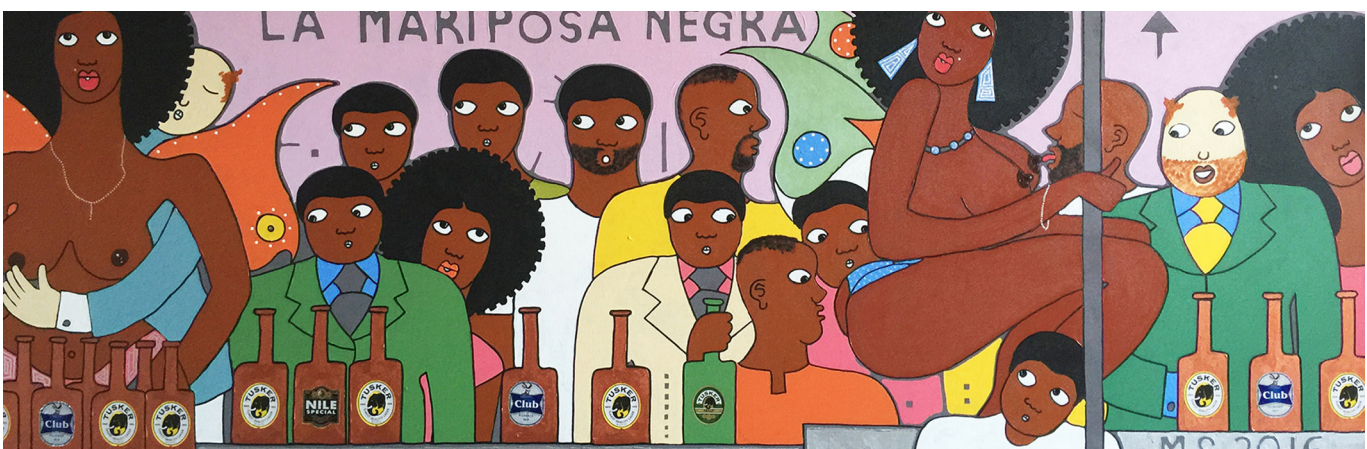
MS: Fine art merchandising!

RO: You have a great online presence with your work, on social media and your website. How do you use it in your own practice now?

MS: I use social media to seek alternative audiences beyond conventional gallery spaces.

RO: More recently you have been working on a different canvas, using the body as a surface. Could you tell us about this?

MS: The work is all new. I'll comment on it later – I am first trying to identify what it is.



Paintings by Michael Soi. Courtesy of Michael Soi

A LOT OF PROGRESS, NOT ENOUGH MONEY: ON THE STATE OF NAMIBIA'S ARTS

MEDLYNE ALICE KUTWA reflects on the achievements and challenges of Namibia's arts scene, which has developed in leaps and bounds since liberation from South Africa's apartheid rule in 1990.



Artwork by John Muafangejo

Land of contrasts: from the colors of the Namib dunes and the crashing waves of the Atlantic Ocean kissing the scorching Namib Desert to the white dust of the Etosha Pan, Namibia is rich in spectacular nature. The year 1990 marked a new beginning in Namibia as the country achieved independence and was able to liberate itself from South Africa's apartheid rule. Since then, it has developed in leaps and bounds. Its capital city, Windhoek, now has a thriving art scene and is known as the gateway to the arts in country.

Visual arts were dominated by the white population in a pre-independent Namibia. Although artists in the Black communities were also painting, sculpting, and making other forms of art, they were not getting the attention they deserved.

John Muafangejo (1943–1987) crashed through barriers by becoming the first Black Namibian artist to have his work exhibited in a predominantly white gallery in Namibia. He

also got international recognition because of his depictions of what was happening around him politically and socially.

When independence was achieved, art in Namibia was turned around and doors opened for indigenous Namibian artists to have their work viewed by the masses. One measure taken to create opportunities and exposure for isolated artists was the Tulipamwe International Artists' Workshop, and its intention to bring together both Black and white artists gave rise to tension. "The country was newly independent, freshly out of the clutches of apartheid, and having black artists and white artists sitting around a table was not, at that time, a normal occurrence," Anna Kindersley recalls. "I remember the first meeting ... being somewhat tense." Within a few years, social and political art by Black artists was being exhibited locally and internationally. Unfortunately, however, many artists feel underappreciated and unrecognized for their efforts to record

Namibian stories through their art. Lack of education, a less than vigorous art market, a lack of involvement on the national level, as well as an uninformed Namibian public have contributed to this. On the other hand, the National Art Gallery of Namibia (NAGN), the John Muafangejo Art Centre (JMAC), and the Franco Namibian Cultural Centre (FNCC) have been working tirelessly to educate the public on the arts.

As an inherent source of entertainment, music has played an important role in both pre-independent and post-independent Namibia. Musicians like Erna Chimu, Shishani, Elemotho, Big Ben, Lize Ehlers and others have been producing truly Namibian music that is attracting an international audience.

A few years back, the stars of the rebooted Mad Max movie series gathered in the unforgiving heat of the very fitting Namib Desert to shoot scenes for Mad Max: Fury Road. In contrast, the local film industry has



Discussing the artwork on site



A walk-through with the artists in the *Wbose role is it to educate the public about art?* exhibition.
Courtesy of Nashilongweshipa Mushaandja Jacques

struggled painfully to tell Namibian stories through film. A lack of funds has been holding back the progress of film in Namibia. The lack of funding has also been the major reason why many Namibian visual artists are not able to exhibit internationally, but there is hope that this will change. Several artists and curators have emerged recently who are tackling political, social, and economic issues. In a time when communication is quick and information can be acquired in a click or two, many artists are

more in-the-know about what is happening globally. "Needless to say, there are many diverse opinions about the identity and context of the 'new generation,'" Hercules Viljoen, the director at NAGN, has written. "Contemporary artists who are producing inspiring contemporary artwork ... that comment ... on contemporary issues ... artists who are trying to transform the Namibian art industry into [a] creative society ... recent graduates from a very wide range of

educational institutions here and abroad [and] the post-independence artists." Artists such as Helen Harris, Lukas Amakali, Ismael Shivute, Ndeenda Shivute, Ilovu Homateni, Elvis Garoeb, Salinde Willem, Mitchell Gatsi, Petrus Amuthenu, and Lok Kandjeng are a few of the new generation artists. Overall, considering the well-informed emerging talent that is unafraid to tackle anything and veteran artists' many years of experience, there is no other direction but up for Namibia's art scene.



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